The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being

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William Davies. (2015). *The happiness industry: How the government and big business sold us well-being.* London, UK: Verso Books. 320 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78168-845-8.

One may believe that reviewing a book on the "happiness industry" for the International Society for Humor Studies shows that humor is starting to embrace its natural bedfellow, positive psychology. However, before we all rush to jump on this new focus of interest, it might be worth considering the critiques offered by the author, William Davies.

In his book Davies explores how and why there has been a shift in how we pursue happiness. He argues that happiness has moved away from being a personal goal to one that is used and controlled by a myriad of public entities, exploited by corporations to increase productivity, and even appearing on government agendas. Going beyond his own political and economic expertise, Davies also builds arguments that encompass practices within neuroscience and the science of psychology.

Throughout this British-centric book, Davies' use of words such as "*manipulate"*, "*seducing*", and "*disquiet*" (p. 6) sets the tone of his insights. Of the eight comic styles defined by Schmidt-Hidding (1963), Davies clearly prefers cynicism to get across his message. This book considers, from the perspective of a political scientist, the exploitation of happiness and its transformation into a commodity.

The first chapter locates the launch of the happiness industry in two historical philosophical perspectives. The first is Jeremy Bentham's eureka moment and vision for social reform and utilitarian government. Once this Pandora's Box of pleasure was opened, its measurement by economic or physiological means was pursued, although both methods had problems. The second perspective is that of the German philosopher, theologian-physicist, and experimental psychologist Gustav Fechner. The author uses this history of science lesson to introduce tentative links between happiness and psychology, politics, and economics.

Chapter two introduces the idea that pleasure has a price, a value that can be bought. To do this Davies engages us with tales that relate to the psychology of whiplash, and the potential of "crash for cash" abuse, where he neatly links the condition to the compensation. Once the reader is singing from the same song sheet, he elucidates how we can shop for pleasures with the advent of retail therapy. Once a link between psychology and economy is understood, people are open to the idea that there is a monetary value for happiness. Chapter three elaborates on the price of pleasure, by examining how the pain of spending money can be negated, or exploited, depending on your perspective. This chapter shows that this links to universities with strong business ties. Once we are all aware that money can be connected to pleasure and happiness, chapter four examines how this knowledge is applied, for example, to exploiting work forces and social welfare recipients.

The fifth chapter, "Crisis of Authority," delves into the impacts of this desire for happiness on the weak and strong of a society, instructing the weak to do better and informing the strong about how great they are. Davies suggests that this is evidence for a breach in moral responsibility towards the weak. This chapter also investigates our relationship to anti-depressant drugs and edition changes in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), both of which, Davies argues, are evidence of how medical doctors and caregivers are influenced by and have bought into the "happiness industry".

Each chapter is backed up with between15 and 36 notes, containing a combination of adages and source references, though one who would rather put confidence in an empirical study than an anecdotal blog, for example. Reading and double checking the notes quickly becomes a bit tedious, but if one can depart from this academic obsession and treat the book as a popular "pick up and read" paperback, this will not be too much of an issue.

When Davies presents an argument, he backs it up with a mix of information gathered from newspaper articles, government documents, websites, and blogs, as well as from the results of empirical studies. However, there are direct quotations that have no indication of the source, even when what he

claims was said is important for the arguments he is making. So, he is asking the reader to trust in his accuracy. As trained scientists, this trust is something that most academic humor researchers will struggle to achieve.

There is little doubt that the majority of Davies' claims are very legitimate. For example, how the discovery of psychopharmaceutic anti-depressant medicine with the power to make people feel better led to what he calls a "mass market appeal" which created a shift in perspective away from the psychoanalytical perspective of a person feeling "shame and repressed desires" to it being a sign of their "own weakness and inadequacy" (p.164).

Yet, one cannot really either ignore or accept Davies' thinly veiled warnings against the unscrupulous and unethical psychologists, warnings that are hard to take seriously by anyone who has got their research through an ethics committee. Thus, one needs to be careful not to shoot the messenger. A discerning reader should differentiate the aims of scientists researching positive psychology for their own scientific merit from the goals of economists and the legion of advertisers, market researchers, applied therapists, counsellors, coaches, and consultants who have jumped on the bandwagon selling happiness as a fix for every ill. Sometimes this distinction is not made in the book. Readers should also remember that although the book draws on scientific knowledge, it remains a popular book aimed at an interested general population and should be read as such. If any humor researchers fall into this category, then it is a fascinating exploration and well-grounded argument of how and why people are cashing in on the "happiness industry".

Reference

Schmidt-Hidding, W. (1963). Wit and humor. In Schmidt-Hidding (ed.), *Humor und Witz* (pp 37-160). Munich, Germany: Hueber.

Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic

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Anthony Corbeill. (2015/orig. 1996). *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Xiv + 251 pp. ISBN: 0-691-02739-0.

It is often said that the past is a foreign country. The difficulty implied in that statement is aggravated when unearthing the humour of an ancient society with a different language. Anthony Corbeill originally met this challenge in 1996 and now Princeton University Press has reissued his valuable book.

Corbeill used Cicero, who was the preeminent orator wielding a reputation as the funniest man in late Republican Rome (p. 44), as a window into wider society and the role of humour in upholding and enforcing communal norms. Cicero's writings are the means for tapping into an array of other evidence—from prayer ritual to philosophical speculation to physiognomic texts –in order to show that he was catering to the ethical predispositions of his audiences.

This book is not an examination of humour in Roman society as a whole. Corbeill makes clear that Cicero's humour was upholding the patriarchal and educated standards of elites who determined what it meant to be a Roman citizen. As a standard bearer of that elite Cicero ridiculed deviance and thereby helped to reinforce those conventions. Corbeill is aware of Bergsonian theories of corrective uses of humour marking social boundaries and nonconformity. Consequently, we learn that witty abuse backed by proof was an approved technique for Roman orators. Additionally, their milieu was far more accepting of political invective than contemporary Anglosphere countries, although that is not to say it is any less practiced in those countries.

What is unusual for us is the lack of compunction with which Romans attacked physical deformities. Such jibes, humorous or otherwise, were justified by the belief that physical appearances reflected the soul and moral proclivities of a person and that "a deformity signals a moral fault" and a deviation from *natura*. Such a depraved person was, then, really a member of the lower orders who possessed "bad habits and false beliefs" (p. 33). A physical peculiarity not only arose out of an evil character rather than chance but also marked individuality, which was an aberration from Roman values and a slight upon the natural "justice of social and political stratification" (p. 35).